

Evolving India's Look East to Act East Policy: An Analytical View

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Abstract

The present article seeks to answer India's evolving foreign policy approach towards Look East to 'Act East' policy during the Narendra Modi government. We can see in the present context that India's foreign policy and its diplomatic approaches took a paradigm shift in the present century, especially during the Narendra Modi era both in terms of pragmatism as well as ideals. The study begins with a brief introduction in a historical and geopolitical perspective in foreign policy representations of India's engagement with the states of Southeast Asia before and during the cold war as well as in the post-cold war period. Further, the article tries to analyze the India's economic co-operation and strategic dimension of 'Look East' to 'Act East' policy and diplomacy in general and to inquire particularly into economic and strategic dimension towards its Look East to 'Act East' policy

Keywords: 'Act East' Policy, Economic Integration, Geopolitics, Look East, Strategic Dimension.

Introduction

Foreign policy is not only about the study of international relations rather it is related to aspirations and aims, a nation wants to achieve with other states and international organisation. It's an outgoing process, where both domestic and external factors interact with one another in different situations. Geographically speaking, India is much closer to Southeast Asia in contrast to other major powers in the world. In terms of its geopolitical, geoeconomics and geostrategic context south-east Asian region is very much important to India's extended neighbourhood. During the course of events, India and the countries of Southeast Asia have passed through the various phases of history.

In a historical context, Kautilya in his *Arthashastra*, originally compiled in the 4th century B.C. ranks the pursuit of profit above all other goals in life and recommends the route along the west coast of India to traders because of large numbers of ports established there (Ghosh & Muecke, 2000,26).

Further, the early Buddhist literature of North India (100 BC-250 AD) is full by means of references to rich landowners who invested their wealth into trading ventures and usually handled long-distance trade (Ibid, 2000). The archaeological evidence from the Indus Valley civilization dating back to 2500 BC has also revealed that the Indian mariners had reached many Mediterranean ports (Chaturvedi & Saigal, 1996, 1-2).

The cultural combinations of relations coordination emerged due to the quarantine of two major systems of faith and belief. The spread of religious and cultural message from India and China travelled to South East Asia, the imprints of which are having evidence even today. It is no wonder that the idols of Rama, Ganesha, Shiva, Parvati and Sita are worshiped in the Buddhism land of

South East Asia. It is the combination of above religious syncretism. The cultural synthesis is also reflected in life styles, names, architecture. The principal centre of learning based on Buddhist philosophical and religious discourses for whole South East Asia are there in the region. The Temples of Angkorwat and the Lvong probing temples in Cambodia and Laos have episodes on Hindu epics. It spreads the teaching of Buddhist in South East Asia as well as in China (Muni, 2011, 3).

Further, the navigation in the eastern part of the Indian Ocean (i.e., Bay of Bengal) also goes as far back as pre-historic times. The Hindus, during the first ten centuries of our era, expanded their culture gradually towards east, and consolidated between the 7th and the 10th centuries. This expansion was of the southern India, more so by the three Dravidian maritime kingdoms-those of the Cheras, the Pandyas and the Cholas (Verlinden, 1987, 34). The most significant dimension of maritime dimension in this sector was perhaps the cultural confluence of Southeast Asia, which began in the 1st Century AD leading to the establishment of Indian associations in Malaya [incorporated into the Sri Vijaya Empire] and in Java.

It's also a well-established fact that the Southern kingdoms in historical times has been connected more with Ceylon and farther India than with any kingdoms, north of the Vindhya. Both the Pandyas and Cholas kings were engaged in sporadic warfare with Sri Vijaya monarchs for over a century and a half (Panikkar, 1955, 65). The Chola emperor Rajendra in AD 1007 led in person an expedition against the Sri Vijaya, captured Kedah and established Chola Empire on the Malaya Peninsula (Ibid, 1955). The movement from across the Bay of Bengal to India not only included the voyages of Chinese pilgrims but also sent their navies to the Malaya Archipelago and into the Bay of Bengal.

With the advent of Europeans entry into the Indian Ocean region, became the contested region. The Indian Ocean region before the entry of Vasco de Gama was used for peaceful activities but activities of Europeans in the region became conflictual for controlling the Indian ocean. Finally, the British Empire took over the reign leading to colonization of the Indian subcontinent along with the states across the Indian ocean region. In the post Independent India and during the Cold war period, both the India and nations in Southeast Asia decided not to involve in a direct relationship. With the binary division of Cold war geopolitics, India remains non-aligned and inclined towards Soviet Union. Whereas, with the formation of Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, was concerned with regional solidarity and left out of any external interference.

It was in the post-Cold War period, the important aspects and the rubric of India's 'Look East' Policy (LEP) was decided by Narasimha Rao government during his tenure as Prime minister of India. India got a boost very soon by becoming a sectoral dialogue partner in 1992 and the coveted status in very next year. It was in 1995, India achieved Full Dialogue Partner (FDP) status in Bangkok and a member of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Summit Partner in 2002. Within few years, India has become part of various mechanism of regional cooperation and dialogue with ASEAN nations. It is near about three decades now that India had launched its LEP in 1992, as a step towards reorienting its foreign policy from cold war bipolarity to globalized multipolarity (Chakraborty, 2016, 167-181). The LEP has emerged as a major area of India's foreign policy in the post-Cold War period. India's LEP is aimed at greater economic alignment and an enhanced political role in the dynamic Asia-Pacific Region in general and Southeast Asia in particular. The various phases of India's LEP makes the beginning of a vibrant relationship in the nineties and in the present century moved on the economic and strategic potential, as well as emphasis on linking the economic interests of the north east region as inclusive (Haokip, 2015, XII).

Further, in an interesting manner and with a pragmatist approach through a major shift in India's foreign policy, the LEP was promoted to Act East Policy (AEP) with the coming of Prime Minister Narendra Modi government to power in May 2014. It was under the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a brain storming session of fifteen Indian '*Heads of Missions*' on 26th August 2014, in Southeast and East Asia. The beginning of the parting from the LEP to the AEP took place under the foreign policy initiatives discussed by the External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and urged them to '*Act East*' and not just '*Look East*.' Ever since, AEP has become the part and parcel of geopolitical discourse in India's foreign policy (Saint-Mezard, 2016, 178). However, India's AEP emphasize on the extended neighbourhood in the Asia-Pacific Region. The policy that was initially perceived as an economic initiative has added cultural, political and strategic dimensions with the inclusions of established devices for discourse and regional cooperation (Bhure & Malegaonkar, 2019, 21). India's contact with Southeast Asia started through various phases of history. It's against this backdrop the research article purports to examine and analyse the look east to Act east policy during the Narendra Modi government in terms of its geopolitical, economic and strategic context.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To understand in brief by introducing the study through its historical and political linkages of India towards the LEP to Act East Policy (AEP).
2. To analyze and examine India's economic cooperation and strategic dimension under its AEP during the Narendra Modi government.

Methodology

The present research will be based on data collected from various primary and secondary sources relating to government, non-governmental organizations and the relevant important policy documents, reports, and debates to understand the AEP along with challenges and opportunities during the period.

Theoretical Framework: A Brief Overview

Understanding the Look East to Act East Policy

India's LEP to AEP was driven and dictated by mainly economic as well as strategic consideration in view of emerging security architecture in the Asia-Pacific Region. Hence, keeping in view India's strategic imperatives the LEP was upgraded to AEP by Prime Minister Narendra Modi government coming into power with a realization to increase economic growth in north-east region as well as playing a significant role in India's AEP. Simultaneously, there is a dire need to have its presence within the larger setting of environment in the Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis growing salience of China in the region.

In contrast to the traditional approach of political diplomacy, the focus has shifted to the extended neighborhood of Asia-Pacific region. The policy has gained geopolitical and geo-strategic dimensions including the establishment of institutional mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation. India has upgraded its relation to strategic collaboration with ASEAN and East Asian nations. There were various major institutional sites of India's economic diplomacy included like Ministry of Trade and Commerce, Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, State governments, Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC), Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), etc. Besides this, India has engaged with relation for such as Bay of Bengal initiative for multi-Sectorial technical and economic cooperation (BIMSTEC), Asia Co-

operation Dialogue (ACD), Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) with other countries in the neighbourhood is a key component of the policy (Ibid, 2019, 20-21).

In order to reap the benefits of AEP, India has upgraded its relations to strategic partnership with Japan, Australia, Singapore and ASEAN, Republic of Korea (ROK) and vying for close ties with the countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The AEP focuses on covering a wider area than just ASEAN and its approach to LEP. The AEP occupies prominence with the changing narrative from South East Asia to the Indo-Pacific. The emphasis is more on economic and security co-operation with the states in east Asia than before, without bargaining on the traditional approach of trio '*commerce, culture and connectivity*' collaboration (Palit, 2016, 81-92).

The word LEP has been replaced by AEP by sending the strong signal by the intellectual of statecraft from New Delhi through its action-oriented approach under its AEP. Sooner the AEP has acquired much significance as subset of India's foreign policy paradigm than it was in the past (Chaturvedy, 2018, 1-2).

Results and Discussion

'Act East' Policy: An Economic Dimension

It was argued earlier also that replacing 'Look' with 'Act' implied that India would be taking a more pro-active and action-oriented approach towards the region with a more focus on regional economic integration and security cooperation. The 1990s witnessed the resumption of exchanging high level visits between India and ASEAN member countries, of which Singapore and Indonesia were most enthusiastic to get India involved in the regional arrangements. However, the early twenty-first century saw the strengthening of LEP with greater stability, focused inputs and stronger domestic support. In Phase second, India's LEP focused more on creating institutional mechanisms to formalize relations with ASEAN countries. The first and second phase in India's LEP generally holds up as a narrative device to capture the evolution of the first two decades of India's eastward engagement. Whereas, the same can't be argued of third phase of AEP. The formation of National Democratic Alliance (NDA-II) government under the Prime minister Narendra Modi marked the beginning of new phase of LEP to Act east Policy formally by announcing in November 2014 at the 12th ASEAN-India summit and East Asian Summit in Myanmar (Ministry of External Affairs, 2014-2015, XVI). Further, he remarked it by saying that, '*A new era of economic development industrialization and trade has begun in India. Outwardly, India's LEP has become 'Act East Policy'*' (Ibid, 2014-2015). As the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has noted in its (2015-16) annual report that has resulted in a renewed energy, vigour, and planning in India's engagement with the rest of the world and as a more confident, articulate, rising power, willing to claim its place on the global stage by discharging its role and responsibilities (Bajpae, 2017, 348-372). The remarkable thing achieved through AEP in September 2017, in economic dimension was the signing of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (FTA) in services and investments. This helped Indian professionals such as Chartered Accountants and Informational Technology (IT) professional and enabled service sectors to benefit enormously (Chakraborty & Chakraborty, 2018, 228).

However, examining the foreign policy trade during in the period (2015-2020) under the NDA-II government tried to provide stable and sustainable environment by promoting the diversification of India's export. The foreign trade policy under AEP seeks to identify the ASEAN nations as an important investment destination by linking Indian industry and facilitating the flow of goods, services, manpower with this region as a whole and especially Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam in particular (Ibid, 2018, 229-30). In case, we see the India's Trade with ASEAN under its AEP

during the period (2014-2019), the trajectory of this export and import in totality shows, the volume of trade has reached US \$ 402,078.9 million. Whereas, the balance of trade tilted in favour of ASEAN with US \$ -77473.42 million during the same period (Ibid, 2018, 230). In a similar fashion, 'Move East' Policy as the term has been described by Indian scholars Tridip Chakraborty and Mohor Chakraborty that have included the countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia. The 'Move East' is an initiative to widen the India's relations with east countries (Ibid, 2018, 178).

The India's trade with 'Move East' partners reveals the fact that volume of trade during in April 2014-to- October 2020 was US \$ 724,201.49. Whereas, in the same period the balance of trade recorded deficit against India with US \$ -444,734.19 million in favour of 'Move East' partners. (Ibid, 2018, 230). The above facts and figures show India to be suffering from the huge trade deficit. In this regard, foreign trade policy recommends a comprehensive view on trade investment and economic cooperation. India needs to increase the export on certain sectors like medicine and agro-commodities and continue to seek tariff concessions in special product like IT and encourage services sectors such as tourism, film and entertainment. Nonetheless, India has to be cautious against unfair trade practices to protect the legitimate interests of Indian industry especially in the context of China in the region.

However, the people-to-people exchange programs were also undertaken, notable being the visit of 175 students from ASEAN member countries to India in November 2016. At the same time, Foreign Service Institute also organized the 10th Special Course for 19 ASEAN Diplomats from 21st September to 21st October 2016 in New Delhi (Ministry of External Affairs, 2016-2017,45-47). The year 2017 was a historic milestone in ASEAN-India relations, wherein we celebrated 25 years of our dialogue partnership, 15 years of our summit level interaction and 5 years of our strategic partnership during this year. Further, India-ASEAN commemorative summit that was held on 25th January 2018, hosted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The summit was attended by the leaders of all ten ASEAN countries. The summit featured release of 11 commemorative stamps, plenary session and a retreat session, in which various aspect of India-ASEAN relations were deliberated upon by the leaders. The business and investment meet and expo, business council form meeting and the textile events (Ministry of External Affairs, 2017-2018, 40-41).

Thereafter, successfully hosting the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit in January 2018, India continued with its calibrated efforts to pursue a dynamic and multi-dimensional relationship with ASEAN. In accordance with its AEP, India has boosted ties with the ASEAN member states across political, security, economic and cultural spheres. The Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Singapore in November 2018 to attend ASEAN-related summits further cements our growing strategic engagement with a very important region in our neighborhood, with whom we share a long-standing civilizational bond. There is increasing emphasis from both India and ASEAN to deal with non-traditional security issues like terrorism, cyber-security, and environmental threats. The cooperation in the maritime domain has gained increasing prominence in India's dialogue with ASEAN and other regional forums. In the enhancing people-to-people contacts, initiatives being pursued include the ASEAN-India network of universities; 1000 fellowships to ASEAN students to pursue PhD in Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and the year 2019 was declared as ASEAN-India year of Tourism (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018-2019,12).

Further, the AEP should also continue to work on improving India's connectivity with ASEAN, particularly to North-East India via the trilateral highway, the Kaladan project that will connect the ports of Kolkata and Sittwe in Myanmar and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-

sectorial Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), will promote peace and prosperity in the region. Beyond this, linked to ASEAN, India is trying further to strengthen its strategic and economic ties with U.S., Japan, Korea, Australia, and also with China. The important sectors like, technology transfer, civilian nuclear cooperation, defence and innovation are to be given priority by the government's promise of progress, will be renewed (Sajjanhar, 2016).

India's Act East Policy: Strategic Dimension

As we know, with the formation of NDA-II government in power in May 2014, Narendra Modi became Prime Minister of India and upgraded the LEP to 'Act East' policy and expanded the earlier scope from geographical to continental and maritime frontiers by increasing the strategic value in the Southeast Asia. Both the tenure of Narendra Modi government has shown the intensive desire and commitment to enlarge India's influence in the security architecture of Indo-Pacific region and Southeast Asia against the rising power and influence of China in the region. There is no denying the fact that the policy has been initiated in the beginning to forge economic strategy to have regional integration and to boost the trade and investments in the Southeast Asian region. However, over the years it has assumed significance in the terms of geostrategic and geopolitical dimensions. The Narendra Modi government has shared her vision through Security and Growth for All in the region (SAGAR). In one of his address to the Shangri La Dialogue in June 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized on evolving a new regional order based on rules and free from any hegemonic power, especially for those country, dependent on sea born trade must be having inherent rights to navigate and freedom in the open sea (Hindustan Times, 2018).

Although, since the LEP India is engaging with ASEAN nations at both multilateral and bilateral levels. However, building of strategic relations with the Southeast Asian countries as well as far East Asian nations has been one of the new areas of emphasis under the AEP. The ASEAN-India plan of action during (2016-2020) was adopted in August 2015, identified areas of cooperation and working together in political, cultural, economic and security aspects. The Maritime Security is gradually emerging as one of the dominant geopolitical strategic discourses in India-ASEAN relations. The very basis for a focus on the Indo-Pacific region in the security architecture in the 21st century is due to its increasing importance as an oceanic basin for maritime trade, energy supplies and sea-lanes of security combined with various other traditional and non-traditional issues. It is in this very context, India's security and defense interaction with Southeast Asia is well argued by an Australian strategic analyst David Brewster in two sets of strategic imperatives. Firstly, to be a predominant power in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea bordering Southeast Asia. Secondly, to assume a greater strategic role in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region -emphasis added (Brewster, 2013, 145-146).

India is also a part of the ASEAN defence ministers meeting plus (ADMMP) framework consisting of ASEAN countries and eight other nations. This multilateral group pursues cooperation in maritime security, counter terrorism, humanitarian aid, peace keeping operations and military medicine. India is participating in the annual joint exercise being conducted under this mechanism. It was in 2013, a new era of cooperation in humanitarian action was included, cyber security was another area of cooperation incorporated in 2016. Thus, India had conducted ASEAN Plus eight Defence, humanitarian action and peace keeping operations exercise in Pune in March 2016.

However, the overall objective of the joint exercise is strengthening the capacity and interoperability of the ADMM-plus as well as the armed forces to respond to terrorism, maritime threats and various challenges. The major objective of engagement with ADMM-plus militaries was to achieve the interests of India's AEP as well as supporting India's overall policy and doing justice to

ASEAN-led mechanism (Anand, 2019,29). The most recent exercise of Multilateral Naval exercises (Milan) was held at HQENC Visakhapatnam on March 2018 attended by many friendly foreign navies. However, the 2020 exercise of Milan was postponed in March 2020 due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Thus, making this joint naval exercise a strategic security component of India's policies in the neighbourhood is a part and parcel of its action-oriented AEP.

In addition to this, India is regularly leading the joint naval exercise of KOMODO in Indonesia that began in March 2014, is a multilateral Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) exercise. The third iteration of the joint exercise took place in May 2018, off the coast of the Lombok Straits of Indonesia. The exercise includes command post exercises, medical civil action projects, field training exercise a sailing pass and various cultural activities. The maritime interception, search and rescue and learning from each other's best practices are some of the other facets of such manoeuvre (Ibid, 2019,30).

Besides this, under its AEP India's defense and security relations with 'Move east' partners like Japan, Australia and South Korea were testimony to the rebalancing in the Asia-Pacific region and sending out the strong signal to China on the issues of freedom of navigation in international waters with the emerging footprints of China's enlargement in the South China Sea and in the Indian Ocean waters. Thus, The India's maritime engagements with ASEAN Countries and wider Asia-Pacific partners has received a major boost to Act East policy significantly by acting as facilitator and net security provider in the Indo-Pacific Region.

Conclusion

The Way Forward

Finally, it can be concluded by saying that in regard to its LEP to AEP, there has been paradigm shift under the Narendra Modi government in recent years. During in recent times, the covid time is hitting hard the expansion of the regional activity and its domestic compulsion at present is compelling to focus on home front. Though, India leads the world by helping the world with the vaccines. Beyond this, there are certain geopolitical economic and strategic concerns in recent years in the Indo-Pacific region. The main issue in LEP to AEP initiative is the regional economic integration and the security architecture in the region with the increasing Chinese presence in Southeast Asia and greater Indo-Pacific region. For India, there is a dire need to incorporate its neighborhood countries to involve in the realm of the overall scheme of geopolitical and economic development.

In this regard, New Delhi have to resolve its outstanding issues and to strengthen the development of economic coordination with them. The AEP pertaining to the apparent connectivity in the region needs to be discarded and have to connect strongly inwardly by implementing the AEP in letter and spirit. There is no doubt that maritime security has also emerged as potential challenge in our LEP to AEP. For that India needs to assume the leading role in revitalizing the sub-regional initiative in the region. India must continue to focus on further strengthening collaborations with ASEAN nations and 'Move east' partners. The partners must work promote economic revival, seek strategic cooperation fight terrorism, and enhance maritime security and defense cooperation, to encourage trade and commercial interaction with countries of South East, East Asia and Asia Pacific. Not only this, India must further strengthen its strategic and economic ties with the US, Japan, Korea, New Zealand. The important sectors like technology transfer, civilian nuclear cooperation, defense and innovation should be given priority. Last but not the least, India's relations with U.S. and Russia needs to be strengthened in a pragmatic way, along with the process of engagement with China must be in continuity to make the world order more sustainable.

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